

Science

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Life in the Amazon Rain Forest

by Ronald Scheibel

Genre	Build Background	Access Content	Extend Language
Expository Nonfiction	• Animal Behavior • Rain Forest • Habitats	• Labels and Captions • Definitions • Diagram	• Compound Words

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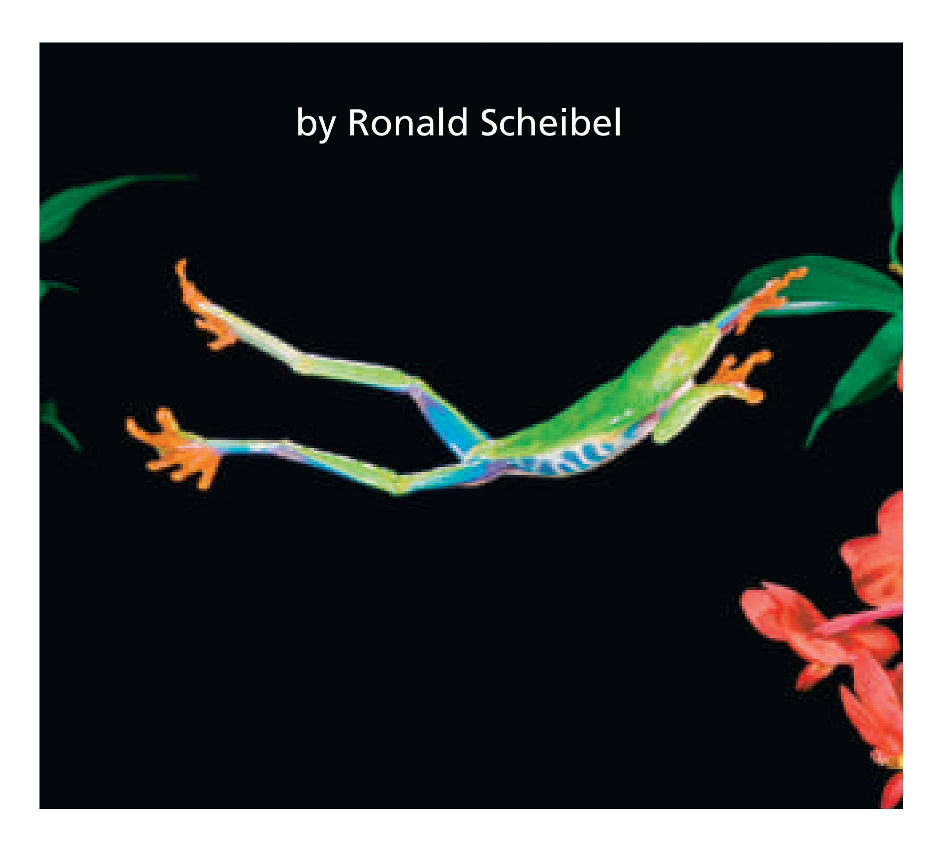


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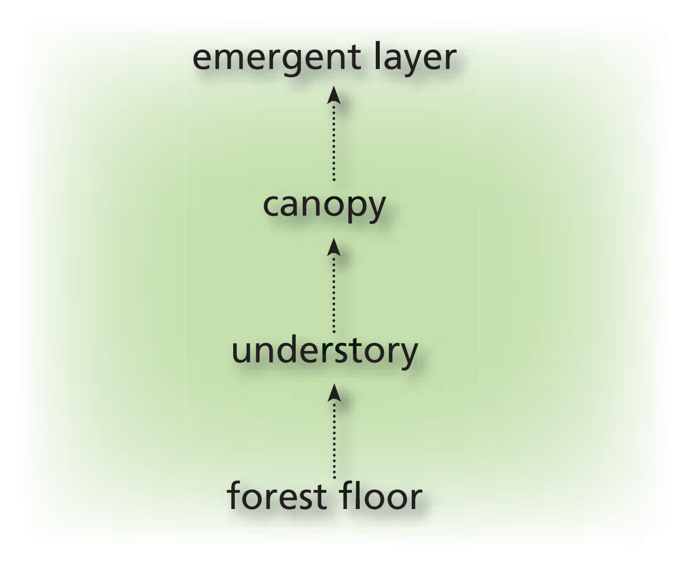
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Life in the Amazon Rain Forest

Somewhere in your city or town, there probably is a four-story building. In that building, life is different at every level. You may live in such a building. The ground floor, for example, might be a store. The second floor might be an office. The top floors might be apartments.

In a way, the Amazon rain forest is like a four-story building. Life at the treetops is very different from what you find on the forest floor. Each level is very different from the others.

The four levels are:



We will take an imaginary trip up to the top of the rain forest habitat. Although we will move slowly, we will see only a small part of the action. Hundreds of animals live at each level. We can only hope to catch a glimpse of a few.

habitat: place where a plant or animal normally lives

Before We Go

Before we start our climb up to the treetops, let's look around and see what we can notice.

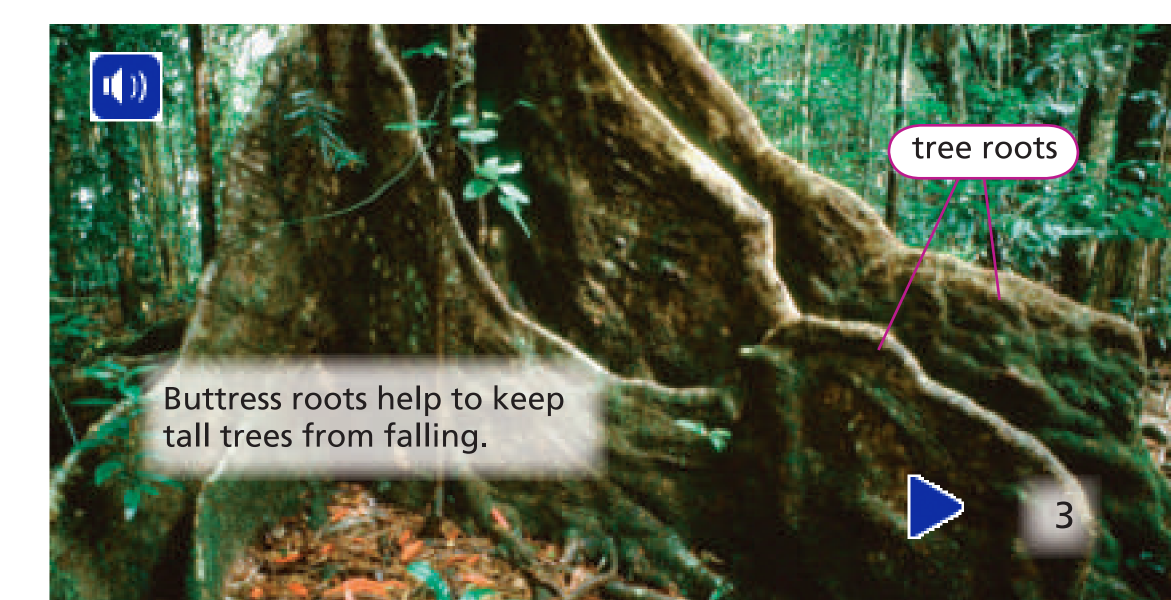
First of all, everything is moist, or even wet. It rains most in the Amazon afternoons. Probably one half or more of all fresh water on Earth is in the Amazon River system.

Next, notice that it is rather dark, even in the middle of the day. Huge trees reach over 150 feet in height. They have thick branches that block the sunlight from reaching the ground.

At ground level, most of the big trees you see spread out like fans near the ground. Since the soil is shallow, the tall trees need wide roots to get a good "foothold." These roots are called buttress roots.

shallow: not deep

buttress roots: wide roots that spread out all around the base of tall rain forest trees

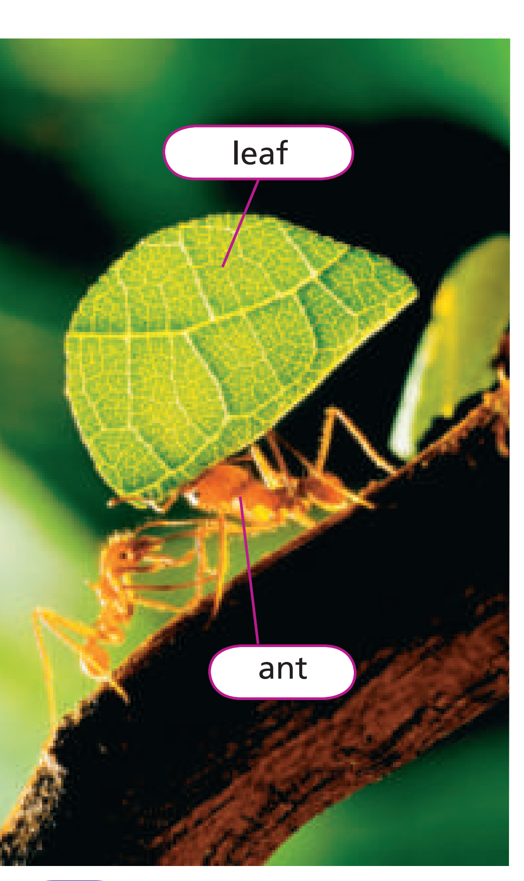


Buttress roots help to keep tall trees from falling.

The Forest Floor

Down on the ground, the air is very still. All around, insects buzz, birds call, and monkeys shriek and howl. Ants crawl on the ground and up the trees. As many as 43 different species of ants can be seen on a single tree. Some whole countries do not have this many species of ants!

One very interesting species of ants, the leafcutter ant, lives in large colonies with as many as seven million ants. Their underground nests can be as large as your classroom. These ants clear large areas, cutting leaves into pieces. They carry the pieces to their nest. But they don't eat any of the leaves! Instead, they use the leaves as fertilizer for growing a certain type of fungus, which they eat. The leafcutters are like farmers, fertilizing their crops.



Leafcutter ants hard at work

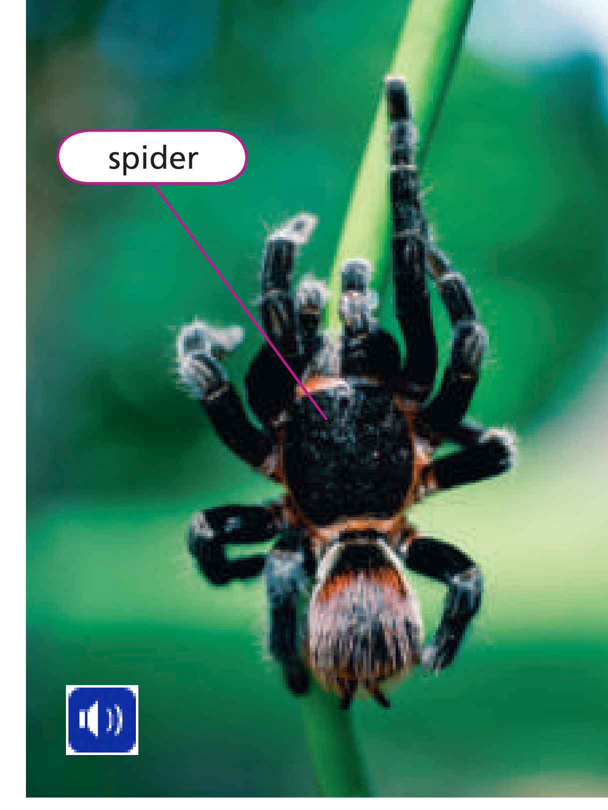
fungus: a type of living thing that absorbs food





The Understory

We are now ready to start moving up the tree. We will see what animals live at the understory. There is plenty of room between the trunks of the large trees for smaller trees, ferns, vines, and palms. Many plants cling to the surface of tree trunks and have no roots in the ground.



The tarantula feeds on small frogs, lizards, and birds.

We may see a giant poisonous tarantula spider in the understory. Tarantulas can be as large as 10 inches across. They hunt lizards and small birds.

You also might see bats flying at this level. You may know bats as blind insect eaters, but in the Amazon there are bats that can see. These bats sip flower nectar instead of eating insects. They go from flower to flower sipping nectar and helping to carry pollen for the flowers. This is good for the bats and for the flowers.

understory: the level just above the ground, where bushes and small trees live



Monkeys and opossums sleep at different times, so they can share a home.

The Canopy

Don't look down! We are on our way up, more than 100 feet above the ground. This is the canopy, where the branches spread out for every inch of sunlight. This is perfect for monkeys that like to leap from tree to tree. It is the busiest and noisiest level in the rain forest.

In the canopy, you might see a colorful toucan (bird) eating a snack of fruit or a hairy sloth (mammal) hanging from a branch. Its damp fur turns green with moss, helping it to blend in.

The canopy is so crowded that some animals share their homes. During the day, you see a nocturnal opossum asleep in a hole in a tree. At night, when the opossum feeds, a monkey comes and sleeps in the same hole.

nocturnal: active at night and sleeping during the day

The Emergent Layer

Finally, we've made it to the emergent layer. What a great view! Trees need to grow at least 130 feet tall to stick out above the canopy.

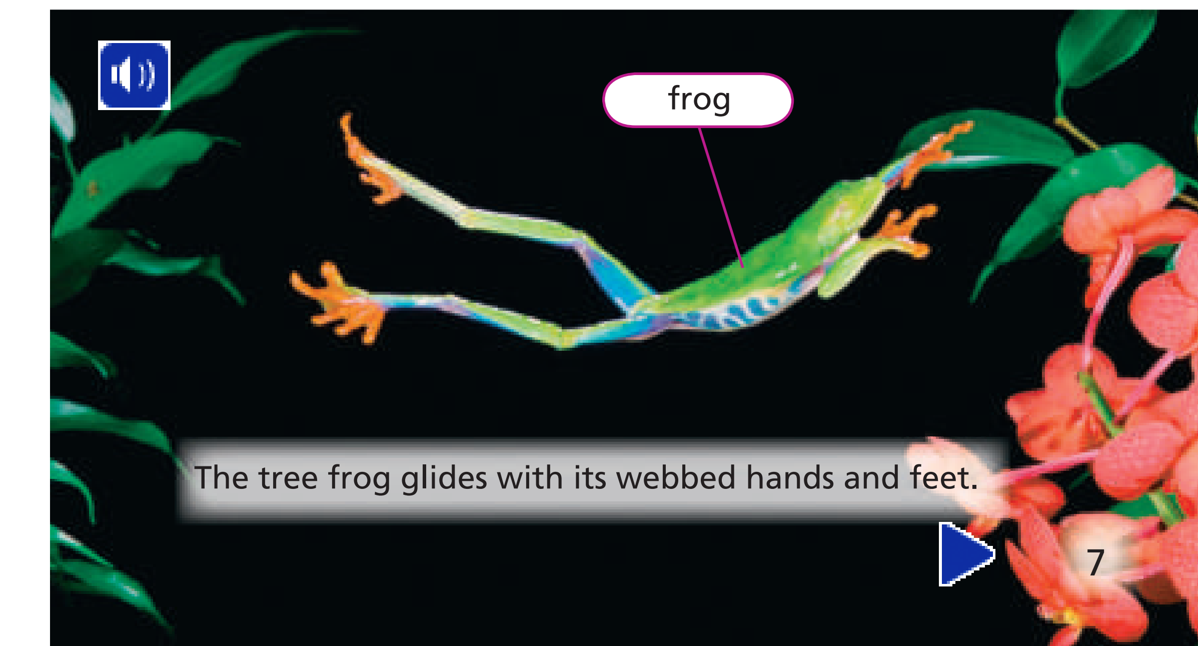
You might view a spider monkey swinging up here. Or you might see a gliding tree frog using its webbed hands and feet to glide up to 40 feet.

Here, you can see the sun and feel a breeze. It is less wet here than at any other level.

Although this layer is less crowded than the canopy, more than 1,800 species of birds and 250 kinds of mammals live here. You will see some surprising animals up here, including iguanas and tiny mouse opossums.

This afternoon, the rain clouds are forming. Are you ready to head home and tell everyone about the amazing world you have seen?

emergent layer: the top rain forest level, where only a few trees grow above the canopy

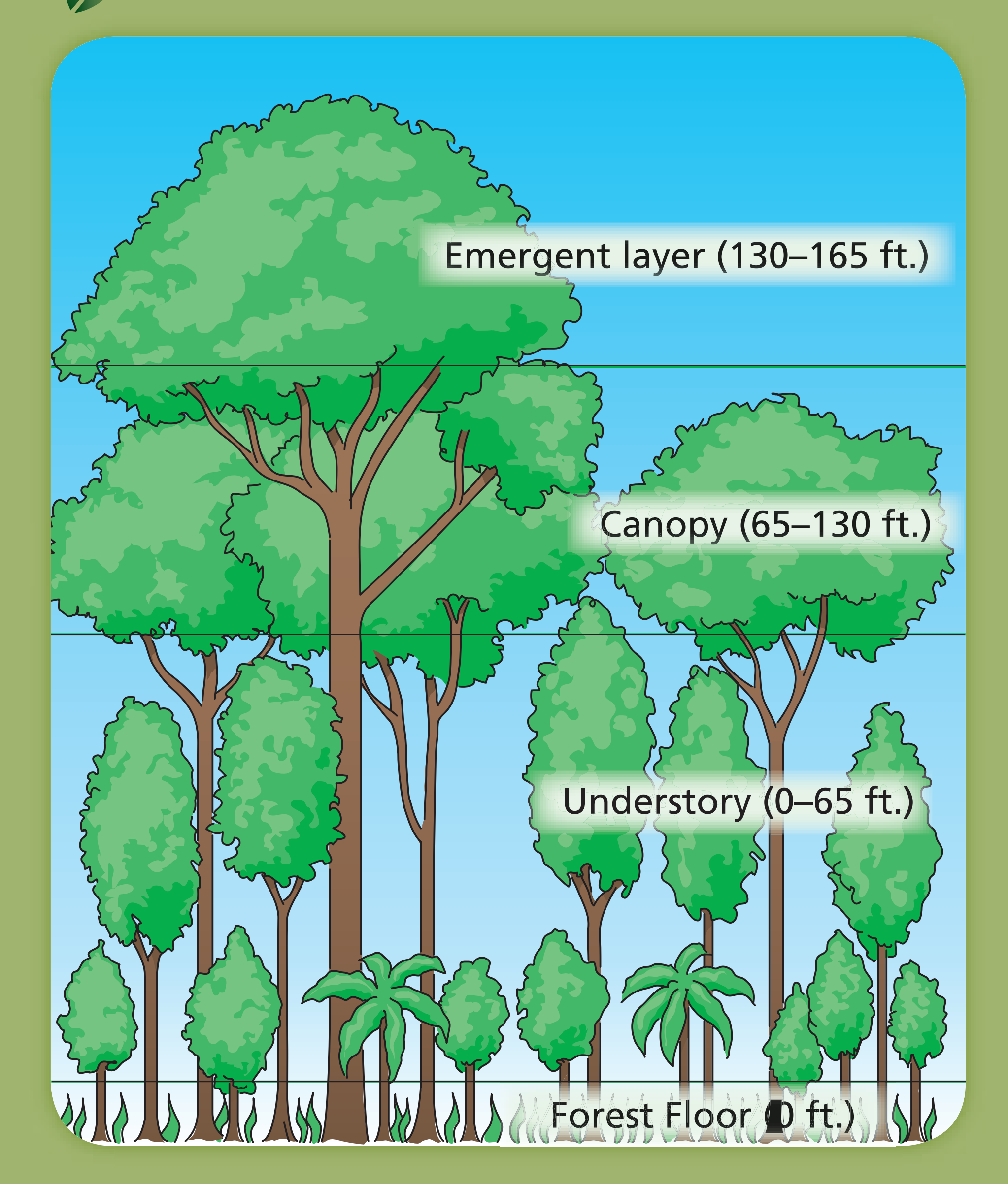


The tree frog glides with its webbed hands and feet.





The Four-Level Rain Forest





Talk About It

1. How do Amazon bats and flowers help each other?
2. How often does it rain where you live? How would things change if it rained hard every day?

Write About It

3. Find out more about one of the animals mentioned in this book. Write about that animal on a separate sheet of paper.

Extend Language

The word *leafcutter* is a compound word. It is made of the word *leaf* and the word *cutter*. Is *treetop* a compound word? What are the two smaller words in *foothold*?

Can you find any other compound words in this book?

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